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ABSTRACT

Using grounded theory, this study examined the experiences and perceptions of education doctoral students, aged 40 to 57, as they communicated them. Twenty-one mid-life students in 9 universities throughout the United States and 1 in Canada comprised the sample. Consistent with systems theory, the holistic research used in both questionnaires and in-depth telephone interviews included the multifaceted experiences of the respondents. Examined categories included: (1) decision to enter; (2) admissions process; (3) early classroom admissions; (4) socialization and acclimation; and (5) balance of work, family, and student roles. Findings indicate that mid-life doctoral students exhibit many characteristics of the adult learner while also maintaining characteristics unique to this mid-life doctoral demographic. (Contains 46 references.) (SLD)

Crisis or Turning Point? The Frustrations and Transformations of the Mid-life Education Doctoral Student

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Paper prepared for presentation at the
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Abstract

Using Grounded Theory, this study examines the experiences and perceptions of education doctoral students, ages 40 to 57, as they communicated them. Twenty-one mid-life students in nine universities throughout the United States and one in Canada comprised the sample population. Consistent with Systems Theory, the wholistic research approach employed in both questionnaires and in-depth telephone interviews included the multi-faceted experiences of the respondents. Examined categories included: decision to enter, admissions process, early classroom experiences, socialization and acclimation, and balance of work, family and student roles. Findings indicated that mid-life doctoral students exhibit many characteristics of the adult learner, while also maintaining characteristics unique to this mid-life doctoral student demographic.

Crisis or Turning Point? The Frustrations and Transformations of the Mid-life Education Doctoral Student

Introduction

Demographical projections for college and university enrollments typically indicate that there will be a significant growth in adult student enrollment in the coming years (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). Taking into account this changing demographic, institutions need to address the needs of and to evaluate current programs for non-traditionally aged students. Typically, this population has fallen into the category of "adult learners," those who are above the 18-22 year age bracket and who exhibit certain characteristics different from those of their younger peers. The literature on adult learners is copious particularly as it concerns undergraduates (Farabaugh-Dorkins, 1991; Hazzard, 1993; Allison, 1995; Berger & Milem, 1997). Older adults or "seniors" have also enjoyed attention of academic researchers (Little, 1995; Pardi, 1996). Several researchers have focused on graduate students (Hagedorn, 1993; Aguinis, Nesler, Quigley, Suk-Jae-Lee & Tedeschi, 1996;) or doctoral students as a group (Cunningham, 1996; Nerad & Miller, 1996; Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Golde, 1998; Bair & Haworth, 1999). Doctoral students in education were the focus of other studies (Cunningham, 1996; Erickson, 1996; Evans & Miller, 1997; Valentine, 1987). Some studies of non-traditional doctoral students have included over-30s in their sample population (Hagedorn, 1993; Erickson, 1996; Evans & Miller, 1997; Dinham, 1999).

However, little attention has been paid to the mid-life graduate student, those adults in the "sandwich generation" demographic, aged 45-60, who are pursuing post-baccalaureate degrees. Even narrower in scope is the evidence of scholarly reflection on the mid-life doctoral student (Broyles & Nye, 1999). Yet, students over 40 are the fastest growing age cohort in postsecondary education (Education Resources Institute, as cited by Smeby and Sisco, 1997).

Graduate educational programs are as likely to include those who have a decade or two of work and family experience as those who are mere months from their baccalaureate ceremonies. Many of those entering the academic professions, either as faculty or in administration, are long past the age of consent. For them, as for many others, making a

commitment to higher education as a primary profession demands returning to student status. They are adult learners, yet with needs and expectations different from those of both their younger colleagues and their contemporaries in undergraduate or even masters degree programs. Although attitudes of faculty and administration towards adult students have become more positive in the 90s (Smeby & Sisco, 1997), resultant actions, such as changes in programs, services and pedagogy do not necessarily follow. And, mid-life adult students do not necessarily experience higher education in the same ways as those twenty or more years younger.

As Bair and Haworth (1999) noted in their meta-synthesis of research on doctoral student attrition and persistence, "...there exists a strong need for qualitative research that seeks to gain directly from students their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding continuation or attrition. Such studies have the potential to shed more light on the importance of previously identified variables as well as surface new factors or combinations of factors that play a central role in attrition and in retention" (p. 28). This study employs that suggested inquiry and proposes to shed some light. Although it certainly contains implications for attrition and retention of mid-life doctoral students, that is not its sole focus.

Purpose and Framework

The purpose of this study is to provide greater understanding to administrators, faculty and students in education doctoral programs of the lived experiences of mid-life doctoral students. This purpose is inseparable from the conceptual framework which guides the study, that of naturalistic inquiry and grounded theory. The naturalist paradigm conceives realities as holistic, with the "knower and known [as] interactive, inseparable" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). Causes and effects are inseparable from each other.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe their term, grounded theory, to mean "theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process" (p. 12). There is no preconceived theory in mind; rather it is allowed to emerge from the data. Gathering the data demands being open to multiple possibilities, making use of multiple avenues of expression, and using nonlinear forms of thinking to gain a fresh perspective. (p.13). "Analysis is the interplay between researchers and data"(p. 13).

In this paper, I examine the role of the over-45 "mid-life" doctoral student in a variety of established educational programs. Using data gathered from 21 students in doctoral programs of ten institutions, I focus on the first phase of their experiences and achievements. This phase concerns their decision to enter a doctoral program, the admissions process and entrance into their programs and the first two years or completion of their course work, up to the awarding of their formal candidacy.

The complete project is a 3-phase, multi-method study transcending the entire doctoral student experience, from entrance into their doctoral studies program to the first year of their post-doctoral position in academia. This paper concerns only Phase 1.

The questions I asked concern the students' motivation for entrance into a doctoral program; their experiences with the admissions process and classroom interactions; their socialization into their particular institution and advanced academia in general; and their commitment to and concerns about continuing to completion. I wanted to know why they chose to enter educational doctoral programs at this time of their lives, what they expected from the program and what they are getting from the program so far. These questions were designed to obtain data from the participant's point of view.

This study proposes to examine the experiences of mid-life doctoral students and obtain their own opinions and reflections on the doctoral study process as they experience it. Understanding how older students'experiences affect and are affected by their doctoral studies will enable decision-makers to adapt programs to accommodate their needs. Many researchers have studied doctoral students for the purpose of explaining attrition and retention (Valentine, 1987; Hagedorn, 1993; Nerad & Miller, 1996). Although this study is not intended to address persistance and attrition of educational doctoral students, but rather to illuminate their experiences in being doctoral students, some models of persistance offer relevant lenses through which to examine the micro-issue of older doctoral student academic and social integration into their chosen programs and institutions. These will be mentioned and related in appropriate sections of the Findings.

In order to plan for the effects of the anticipated changes in population demographics, institutions need to address the needs and to evaluate their current programs for older students. Neglecting to pay attention to the mid-life doctoral student could result in

decreased institutional and program effectiveness and a resultant decline in financial resources. Satisfied students will put less stress on the system and themselves, resulting in a more favorable classroom climate. Successfully prepared students will contribute to the reputation of the institution, thereby helping to increase both future enrollments and financial resources. This study of mid-life students in doctoral education programs proposes to illuminate the needs and successes of both the student and the institution.

Methodology

This study is primarily of a qualitative nature. Inclusion of a survey questionnaire creates a mixed-methodology, yet the questionnaire poses primarily open-ended questions more typical of a qualitative inquiry. Examination of documents published by the institutions, either in printed form or on websites, provided background and supportive material by which to examine the institutions' intentions, program offerings and mission.

Instrument

The data reported in this paper reflect the reponses of 21 mid-life doctoral students in education programs to questionnaires and to lengthy one-on-one telephone interviews with 18 of them. Three respondents completed questionnaires but could not be located to interview. A standard protocol was used for the interviews. I developed the questionnaire, which included a few standard demographic questions, several closed questions requiring Likert-style responses, several questions requiring respondents to give three responses of their own choosing, and several open-ended questions calling for the respondent to elaborate and explain.

The interview protocol used for students focused on their experiences with the admissions process, their early classroom experiences, their course work and their interactions with faculty and student colleagues. Standard prompts and follow up questions on the protocol addressed respondents' interactions with younger student colleagues and professors, as well as respondents' perceptions of any relevance of their middle age in those interactions. Questions designed to draw out opinions and reflections comprised a major part of the protocol. I designed both protocols to elicit anecdotally abundant narratives that would yield rich data full of thick description (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Data Sources

Examination of documents from the institutions represented included catalogue materials, brochures, and web pages. Data gathered from these documents served as background information. In some instances, they also helped to clarify the institutional perspective as it applied to educational doctoral program contents and mission.

The 21 student respondents range in current age from 42 to 57. They attend one of nine universities in one of eight geographical areas of the United States, and one respondent attends a university in eastern Canada. Sixteen are females; five are males. Eleven are married or with a domestic partner, and two of those have children at home. Nine are unmarried; one is unclassified as to marital status. None of the unmarrieds have children at home. None of the male students have children at home. Their current status in the doctoral program process ranges from first year to completed, with the greatest number (6) preparing to defend their prospectus and acquire candidate (ABD) status. Three of the four respondents who have earned their doctorates did so within the last three years, the fourth in 1994. All were over 50 when they received their doctoral degrees. All but one of the other student respondents will be over the age of 46 when they complete their doctoral programs. The youngest member of this study sample will complete at age 43. Although this respondent is several years younger than the 45-year age arbitrarily chosen as minimum, she is included because she self-identified with the "mid-life" category.

I enlisted my sample population in several ways. I met several at ASHE and AERA conferences; some were referred by faculty at various institutions; word of mouth brought others. Early attempts to acquire a comprehensive list of students fitting my target population were unsuccessful because institutions did not maintain a separate listing of mid-life students.

Questionnaires, accompanied by a letter explaining the purpose and scope of the study and a statement of confidentiality describing the security and use of the data, were sent to most respondents during the months of February through May, 1999. As additional respondents were enlisted, questionnaires were sent, interviews were scheduled and results were cumulatively added to the data. Telephone interviews were conducted during the months of March through June, 1999, and July through August, 2000. Response rate of mailed questionaires was 91%. This high response is not surprising, considering the subjects

had either agreed in person or via e-mail to join the study after meeting me at ASHE or AERA or being referred to me by professors or colleagues.

As data from an increasing number of respondents was received, it was added to and compared with that of prior respondents. Categories emerged and were then integrated or further defined according to their properties and consistent with naturalistic inquiry. Categorizing and assessing the data in a cumulative and comparative method allowed for "mutual shaping" by researcher and respondents, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 340). This simultaneous data collection and processing also allowed for refinement of subsequent interviews. Although the standard interview protocol was employed throughout the data collection process, probing and follow up questions in later interviews aided the researcher in "fleshing out categories, filling in gaps...,clearing up anomalies...and extending the range of information that [could] be accommodated" (Lincoln & Guba, p. 343).

Similarly, microanalysis as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) obliges the researcher to look at data in a general way, yet in detailed comparisons that take into account the interviewees' interpretations. Theoretical comparisons are also vital to theory building and were incorporated as appropriate to the data in the findings section. In this "free-flowing and creative" way, the "interplay that occurs between the analyst and data during the analytic process" (p. 71) occurred.

This interplay revealed that some experiences of education doctoral students in this sample were similar to my own experiences as a mid-life doctoral student. It also revealed that much of it is not. I had presumed that anecdotes and opinions related to me by people in my age group who were undergoing an experience like mine would have some similarities with mine. "..doing microanalysis enables researchers to examine what assumptions about data they are taking for granted" (p. 68). Anticipating themes and relationships is a common practice in any research, and in grounded theory those themes are allowed to emerge rather than to be prescribed in the design. This anticipation does not eliminate or stifle the surprises that make in-depth inquiries into people's personal lives so delightful, as I gleefully discovered.

Limitations

Data were limited to the subjects enlisted by a convenience sample of those whom I met in person, usually by a propinquity of place and time, or those who were referred to me by people whom they knew and presumably trusted. Therefore, there is a certain amount of self-selection bias among them. The data are also limited to what the respondents shared with me, in writing and on the telephone. As a long-time journalist and as a professor of communication, I am an experienced interviewer. However, some important material may have been withheld by the subjects for their own reasons and/or I may have missed a follow-up question or comment that would have added an important piece of information. Finally, any ex post facto inquiry which asks students to reflect on how they were feeling or thinking a while ago risks the loss of detail smoothed over by time. Nevertheless, this study reveals a great deal about how these doctoral students in education experienced their programs and how they viewed those experiences.

Findings

What is it like to be a doctoral education student at mid-life? was the guiding question of this study, which focused on students' experiences up to the awarding of their candidacies. I wanted to know why they chose to enter educational doctoral programs at this time of their lives, what they expected from their programs and what they are getting from the programs so far. I wanted to examine their experiences and perceptions. I wanted to know how they navigated entrance into student status, the "transition stage" (Tinto, 1993), how they coped with the unexpected and what, if any, changes in their expectations and in themselves they had recognized. Thanks to the 21 respondents who volunteered their personal anecdotes, judgments and opinions, my questions were answered.

Findings support the implication that educational doctoral students in mid-life have needs and concerns particular to the demographic, as well as some similar to those of adult learners in general. In discussing these findings, I often include the number of respondents giving similar, or different, answers to open questions. This is to indicate a possible "trend" or concensus. However, the numbers are not necessarily indicators of generalizability, nor are they intended to be so. A view expressed by only several, or even one of the respondents may be as important to the findings as that expressed by all. In other words, "the frequency of

assertion is not necessarily related to the importance of that assertion" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 242 as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 338). Consistent with this philosophy, some responses were included because they were intriguing or offered special insight, even if they were not echoed by any number of respondents.

This section discusses the key findings, as well as some of the intriguing infrequent views. It is organized by prominent themes that emerged. Conversations in lengthy one-on-one telephone interviews and responses to comprehensive questionnaires yielded a volume of rich descriptive data. Respondents were forthcoming and unselfish with their time and energy. They all seemed eager to share their opinions and experiences. As one respondent wrote, "I have always wanted someone to ask me this. Thanks." To facilitate classification of an enormous amount of information, findings in this section will be revealed under several categories: Making the Decision; Expectations and Realities; Transformations. Themes that emerged within each category will be explained within the appropriate section.

Making the Decision

The vast majority of respondents gave both pragmatic and life-fulfillment reasons for engaging in the doctoral degree process and chose their institution because it was nearby. The real estate adage applied to this group of respondents in selecting their institutions. Convenient location was the reason all but two respondents gave for chosing the institution. This finding is consistent with those of Zamadou (1993), who pointed out that nontraditional students usually decided to go back to college and which college to go to at the same time, and of Hagedorn and Doyle (1993), who found that older women are more likely to go close to home for their doctoral studies. One of the two atypical respondents purposely relocated to her home town in another state and chose the institution there. The other made her choice "on impulse" after attending an open house. A convenient location made acting on impulse plausible, however. At mid-life, most people have roots in their communities and professions and, unlike traditionally aged graduate students, they are not mobile or inclined to search out a doctoral program that would demand relocation. Typical of mid-life people, all but two in this study sample were engaged in successful careers when they began their course work, so choosing a doctoral institution within a close geographical area would seem logical, if not requisite.

As Anderson and Swazey (1998) discovered in their study of the doctoral experiences of science, engineering and sociology doctoral students, there are a variety of reasons for entering a doctoral program. The top three given in the Anderson & Swazey study were: desire for knowledge in the field, desire to research in the field, and desire to teach in higher education. In answering questions about why they chose to enter an education doctoral program, respondents in this study showed a great deal of agreement about the professional necessity of a terminal degree. Yet, similar to their science and engineering counterparts, their decisions were based not only on career aspects. Similar also to the adult learners in Farabaugh-Dorkins'study (1991), these respondents have different goals than traditionally aged students. Two primary themes emerged in this area: Moving up and/or meeting professional goals; Exploring and/or serving the higher self.

Moving Up and/or Meeting Professional Goals

In their analysis of interrelationships of educational attainment, labor market situations and socioeconomic status in men's professional lives, Shanahan, Miech and Elder, Jr. (1998) posit that as an individual steps up in his career, he encounters an increased need for educational credentials. In other words, the higher you go in your professional career path, the more likely you are to require higher educational credentials to continue to advance or to achieve security at your present level. Nerad & Miller (1996) noted that a job offer positively impacts persistence. Bair and Haworth (1999) noted that at least one researcher (Lemp, 1980) found the importance of the doctorate to career attainment was the most important predictor of persistence.

All male members and 14 of 16 female members of this study population included the need to obtain a doctorate in order to enter academia (from a career in administration or public school teaching), or to advance in their current profession and/or maintain credibility in it. Men and women agreed that a doctorate was critical to their career path. However, the genders differed in their expressions of this career necessity. Men were unabashedly pragmatic. Women were abashedly ambivalent about their pragmatism. Note the direct statements the males made. (Emphases were added.)

An assistant academic dean at a community college said he wanted "to improve my performance in my current position" and "to gain a credential within my field of education at

the highest level." A dean and VP of Enrollment at a liberal arts college said he wanted "to pursue a college presidency, to gain new career avenues and re-charge my intellectual batteries. I am in place to be president, but I need a doctorate...There is a 'glass ceiling' in academia, even though in business it is not so, that you need a doctorate." An administrator in Program Evaluation said, "to earn greater credentials to enhance my vocation," and a community college professor said, "Having PhD will provide job security & increased earnings." He related an anecdote about reaching the final three in his educational job application processes, only to see the position go to a candidate with a PhD. "It was a wake up call," he said. "A PhD means everything."

Two male respondents mentioned the doctorate as a way to gain professional acceptance, but more, as necessary to be taken seriously by their colleagues. "A doctorate would eliminate the reasons (colleagues) give for objecting to my opinions on issues," said one. "I'm tired of taking abuse from Phd & EdD colleagues for 'only' having a masters and ABD (achieved in another discipline 20 years ago)," said another. He shared an anecdote about a staff meeting when he proposed a course of action, only to be vetoed by a senior staff member who said, "You don't even have a doctorate." He cited that incident as the critical point in his decision to enter a doctoral program.

Only one female respondent alluded to this professional acceptance. "I need a PhD to have credibility/authority in my field," she said. This was her third of the three reasons called for in the questionnaire; the other two related to personal, not career, satisfaction. A youth counselor was the only female whose reasons were pragmatic without qualification. "I wanted to carve out a career path in research and teaching," she responded, "to increase (the) 'competitive edge' and career options & flexibility within (my) field as well as in academic career areas."

Most of the women seemed less certain a pragmatic motive was sufficient or even desirable, even though all but one recognized it and gave it as a reason for their decision to enter a program. Stryker (1985) referred to this uncertainty as a struggle because "Sometimes we [women] have the feeling that what we are doing is not quite normal" (p. 16)

The ways all but one of the females expressed their career needs were bracketed by subjunctives and qualifiers. "I might like to teach (at the higher ed level)...if I want a career

change," said one. "I'm exploring to see if I like it for a possible career change," said another. A former substitute public school teacher, said she "need(ed) a solid career in order to support myself; need advanced degree to make reasonable income." She continued, "Education is important to me because of my background. So, I thought administration in college." A former publishing executive said, "...I was ready to move on. I had always planned to earn a Ph.D., and now the time had come to fulfill that dream. The dream was connected to teaching in college. I had to have the Ph.D. to do that."

A woman who had a Masters degree mused that "at this point in life, I didn't need another MA and thought a doctorate would get me a better job in Higher Ed." Then, she added, "I was doing this out of a pragmatic need, not a great commitment." For her, the higher calling would have been something other than a career advancement.

Mentor superiors prompted some female respondents to consider educational advancement. Some women said the initial idea came from a boss or colleague, not from themselves. " My boss, Dr. X, in my first performance evaluation said I needed to get a PhD because 'you can never move up without one, and you need to move up,'" one woman explained. A woman who was teaching at a university had been granted tenure, but kept at the Assistant Professor level. She said, "We had a change in provosts and the new one said we needed a PhD. So, I knew I needed a PhD." These women would have been happy to remain at the master's level; their supervisors forced them to move up.

For some of these women, the choice to enter a doctoral program was made by default, a mid-life opening of time caused by downsizing or an empty nest led to self-reflection and a search for intellectual and emotional fulfillment. Zamanou (1993) pointed out that nontraditional students frequently cited life events involving work, marriage or family transitions as reasons for deciding to return to college. Men were more likely to cite job-related factors; women frequently mentioned family transitions, including children moving away from home.

A soft money position ended, one woman said, and "I didn't know what to do next, so I decided to take courses at (university)." For this respondent, her job ending was a factor that opened up her time, rather than served as her motivation for a higher degree. She also said she would leave the program for a job that gave her the money she wanted, and she was

unsure about the practical value of the degree. Another woman gave a similar reason. "I was going to change jobs, so it was a good time to chart new seas."

Three other women spoke about the empty nest that offered opportunity.

> I was facing an empty nest. I didn't know it at the time, but looking back, I think that played a role in it...I only had one child and my husband was working, so there was no financial strain and I love to study.
>
> My husband was away during the week at his new job. My daughter was away at school and hardly ever came home..I could be anything I wanted when I 'grew up'!
>
> Was at point in my life where there was not a good answer to the question 'Why not?' My daughter was away in school, so I was free to exercise the option. (V1)

For these women, new pathways seemed to beckon and an opportunity to explore was there. Sheehy (1995) describes a "pit" for women in their mid to late 40s, when most are dealing with menopause and nearly one half have suffered at least one serious depression. But on rising from that low time, into their 50s, they show gains in inner harmony, mastery, life status. (180) Further, she says, most women at or near the top of the scale of well-being have completed college or earned graduate degrees. Most have made dramatic life changes -- returning to school, beginning new careers; generating new dreams; escaping a marriage where they couldn't grow; all of the above. They recognize the advantages of advanced schooling in better jobs where they exercise authority; the ability to be self-employed; a broader expertise or skill base; and fluidity in their careers (189). A 10-year study of nearly 8,000 Americans revealed that, although both genders aged 40 to 60 reported that "midlife is the best place to be," women in mid-life demonstrate a greater gain in personal growth and interpersonal relationships than men (Goode, 1999). Older women are more likely to enroll in doctoral studies for personal satisfaction than younger women (Hagedorn & Doyle, 1993). But women in this study were not alone in their desires for self-actualization and personal growth.

Exploring and/or Serving the Higher Self

To state that any of the study subjects were motivated to begin the doctoral program purely for professional status would be gross oversimplification. Career advancement was

not the only reason for any of them. In fact, all male subjects, as well as all but one of the female subjects, included intellectual growth (self-fulfillment) and learning new material and skills (self-actualization) among the three most important reasons for beginning a doctoral program. Evans and Miller (1997) suggested that those over 50 may perceive more self-empowerment and less job-related career pressure because they were gaining knowledge for its own sake more than for professional advancement. This study did not support that suggestion, since all but two of the respondents cited career objectives as critical to their entrance decisions.

All but one respondent cited self-actualization and self-fulfillment as at least one of their reasons for entering the doctoral program. The person who did not give those reasons for entering has since earned her doctorate, completing it in four years. She remained steadfast in her commitment to expanded professional opportunities as her focus throughout her program, and she moved through the process in a pragmatic and methodical manner, calendaring tasks and due dates and accepting a dissertation subject at the request of her advisor because, "He wanted it done, but it was not my favorite." Reflecting on her lock-step approach, she said, "I grew up in a military family. I'm fairly anal. I had a time track, and I wanted to adhere to it." She truly may have enjoyed the process and found fulfillment in it for its own sake or for reasons other than career-enhancement and degree achievement, but she did not volunteer that information on the questionnaire or during the interview.

At the opposite end of the purposive spectrum, two other respondents, both women, gave self-actualization and self-fulfillment as their only motives for entering doctoral studies. "I like school," said one. "This was not a life change or career change; I just wanted to do it for the 'fun' of it." She has since completed her program and earned her doctorate. It took her eight years, but a relocation from the west to the east coast necessitated entering a new institution during her course work.

The other is in her 35th year of public school teaching and just finished her course work, which she "loved. I knew the practical, but not the theory. I was learning the theory. It was so interesting to me." With no new career objective in mind, she entered the program "to challenge myself professionally" after professors in a development program and later in her MA program "talked me into it."

More typical of the majority of respondents, another respondent was also employed in education when she decided to enter her doctoral program because of the "intellectual challenge" and the availability of the program and financial support. The vast majority of respondents gave both pragmatic and life-fulfillment reasons for engaging in the doctoral degree process. Contrary to their career-related answers, there was no glaring difference in the ways men and women expressed their actualization answers. "Personal satisfaction" came up many times in interviews when respondents recalled their decisions to pursue doctorates. "The learning itself" was another common phrase. Several respondents saw a chance to prove themselves. One respondent said he wanted "to 'dot an I' I should have dotted a long time ago." Another respondent admitted she "had not done that well in undergraduate school. This was my test." Another said, "I wanted to find out if I could really do it."

Before they could find out, they needed to gain admission. And this process presented the test some respondents had foreseen, although in ways none had anticipated. The next section deals with the experiences of admission and transition to life as a doctoral student.

What They Expected and What They Are Getting So Far: Early Experiences in Admissions, Classroom, and Faculty Relationships

Two major themes emerged from respondents' reflections and recollections of their admissions and enculturation processes: Early student experience was a rocky road, fraught with frustration and confusion; Life experience, when integrated into the student experience, could smooth the pathway.

Admissions

Getting admitted to the institution and to the appropriate program presented some challenges to nearly every member of this sample population, although, unlike adult respondents in another study (Hazzard, 1993), most managed to navigate the process without more than a modicum of stress. Most felt confident they would be accepted. Admission rates at the included institutions varied widely, so their confidence may not have come from statistical probability. Because they were all accepted, that confidence was warranted. Each of the included universities, even those with a majority of satisfied respondents, rated at least some suggestions for improvement.

The admissions process, for 11 respondents, was not difficult or particularly frustrating for them individually. Yet, with only one exception, these satisfied respondents commented on the need for additional guidance and advisement during their admissions process. Typical suggestions were "need instructions about time frames"; "hold an orientation about the PhD process"; and "explain the process," including more realistic projections of total cost "both financially and emotionally". Several respondents cited a "disconnect" between what they were expected to do and knowing how to do it. "No one coached (us) on what it would look like. (We) didn't have a clue what to show," said one respondent about the portfolio submission required for admission to her doctoral program. "Even if they gave us a list of books to read or seminars to go to, that would be helpful," suggested an applicant from another institution.

For one fourth of the respondents, the process was a negative one. Tinto (1986) recommended that admissions officers counsel students in making their educational choices. Several aggravated respondents in this study would agree. One major frustration for them, as well as for those who had a smoother admissions experience, was a lack of, or inaccurate, program advising. One respondent, who is switching to her third program since being admitted, said

> People are supposed to decide [what they intend to study] before coming, but that's nonsense because I'm not the only one [searching]. Sometimes, the professors say one thing and when you get there, it's something else. When you've been out of school that long, you may know the direction, but not the best program to get you there.

Another respondent felt similarly befuddled. "You have to come up with three cognate areas. What's that?" she wondered. "I go to my advisor and she says, 'Well, what do you think?' I don't know!"

Another found a lack of advisor time a source of frustration.

> One of the problems at [this institution] is there is not enough faculty in the department so there is a huge advising load for each faculty member. We can't get adequate time for advising. Like what classes should I take? What topic should I pursue?

A respondent who was told to take a course she neither needed nor did well in withdrew from the program because "I thought maybe I wasn't cut out for this and took a year

off." After returning, enrolling in a different program, and completing her course work, she said,

> I believe that there should be better advisement based on the applicant's career goals as the priority rather than what is perhaps a 'better fit' for departmental concern, such as enrollment. I had little knowledge of the overall goals of my department or how to prepare other than to follow the formula laid out in the course catalog. In retrospect, I can see that I could have designed a program with components of (two programs).

Echoing the suggestions of some researchers (Hazzard, 1993), an orientation to the PhD program in order to address "What is this thing? What is my or your role in this thing?" was what one respondent suggested, adding, "They don't care about the problems, they care about the process."

A lack of information about financial assistance, fellowships and graduate assistantships was another sore point with several respondents. Perhaps admissions and program advisors do not realize that such assistance was not available when mid-life students were doing undergraduate work. Older students do not know enough to ask for information because they do not know it may be available to them. "I didn't know how to get fellowships or assistantships. I still don't. I didn't know I could get financial aid. The GI Bill and scholarships were the only things I knew in the 70s when I did my undergraduate work," said one respondent. "I had no idea about the changes in financial aid over the years and that I was eligible," wrote another.

Several respondents suggested a category for "life experience" be addressed in the admissions process. "Please honor the experiences of older applicants; count them as valuable," wrote one respondent. "Don't judge a possible student by their undergraduate [GPA)]! Look at the whole person - their practical experience, their motivation, how much they want the degree," wrote another. "Consider developing a doctoral program which requires years of real life experience for admittance. It is not given enough weight," suggested another. A "life experience portfolio" was another suggestion for addressing the experience of older entering students. These recommendations are in agreement with those of Lunneborg (1974) and Stricker (1994), who recommended a combination of personal

questions, high school grades and GRE scores, along with background factors of the individual to provide a good indicator of college success.

A system that seemed fraught with "politics" and "arrogance" and advisors who used demeaning phraseology in rejecting their applications were experiences of three female respondents. A professor told one applicant she was "too stupid to do this." Another received "a letter saying I was not the caliber of the other applicants." Both had scored well on their GREs and both were allowed to take courses on a probationary basis after intervention by a faculty member in the program. All three began as "non-matrics" and were admitted to their doctoral programs after their first course grades.

Graduate Record Exams (GRE) were generally considered "useless," and "irrelevant to the program," even for those who said they did well on them. "(They) are for weeding out people," one respondent said. "It has nothing to do with anything else." Research focusing on GRE scores as predictive is inconclusive. Lunneborg (1974) indicated older students' scores in vocabulary and spelling were in the highest one-fourth, while quantitative scores were in the lower one-fourth. Hartle (1983) found that older students had lower GRE scores in quantitative than verbal, but concluded that the differences may result from "more verbal stimulation in everyday living for most persons" (p. 21) and the results on research on GRE scores as predictors of success in either verbal or math were inconclusive. Lindle (1998) determined that the GRE analytic scores were good predictors of non-traditional students' success, as rated by their faculty.

Many respondents in this study sample were able to use previous GRE scores, some from the 1970s, so only six of the respondents actually took them. One respondent credited her old GRE scores with her final decision to apply. "When they said I didn't have to take the GRE again, that was it!" she said.

But the admissions process was not universally troublesome; two of the respondents had nothing negative to say. One wrote that admissions staff "took a chance on me. I didn't have the most sterling of marks from undergrad days, but they considered my accomplishments and work after that as important considerations as well." The other praised the reflective essay required by her institution because "I was really in a mood to do that."

Classroom

When they reflected on their early course work and the classroom experiences and socialization, three themes emerged for these respondents: Learning about education from a theoretical perspective was joyous and satisfying; learning how to acclimate to the classroom and to the entire doctoral study process was more difficult; life experience could be a positive component. Again, integration was a key that unlocked doors that opened to produce or facilitate change. Socialization is the process by which a newcomer is made a member of the academic community (Golde, 1998). Those who successfully socialized found ways to incorporate their prior life and professional experiences in both the academic and the cultural processes and they gained personal satisfaction from doing so.

Learning about education

Once the frustrating process of getting accepted to their institutions had passed , nearly all respondents found they enjoyed being in the classroom, finding the material itself especially gratifying. Some of Golde's (1998) non-education doctoral students found the unfamiliar "philosophical and analytic perspective"(p. 60) of their studies less satisfying than the textual analyses of their undergraduate work. But respondents in this study did not. "It was new and fresh and I enjoyed the luxury of reading and writing," one said.

Many were elated by what they were learning, especially in the first few courses. "Fun" was what some new doctoral students called it. "Sometimes it was so much fun! I had this assistantship and then I would feel guilty about it because it feels like playing instead of going to the office," said one. "I like to study. The content was fun. In leadership courses, it was a learning experience," said another. A third summed up the novelty of the material as "playing with a whole new set of ideas."

Some found their early learning experiences addictive. "I was thirsty for knowledge. It became addictive," said one. "[it was] wonderful! I loved it! I couldn't get enough. I wanted to take every course," said another. "It was absolute heaven! If I got interested in something, ok, I go to the library and get it. It was so satisfying to track down something," enthused one student research assistant, who added that her faculty superviser tried to rein in her enthusiasm for bringing huge piles of material in answer to every question.

Meeting the challenge of learning new material gave some respondents an ego boost. "The first class was the History of Ed. and I really liked it. We talked about...all you hear about but don't know about academia. I got an A, so that was an incentive to keep going. It was a very positive experience," said one.

For two respondents, both male, enjoyment of the classes was only part of the pleasure they felt at being students in a college atmosphere. "At first, I thought going to class was a lot of fun. I was learning new stuff, hanging out at college, being a college student," said one.

"It was fun being a grad student. I remember one clear fall day I was walking across the campus to Starbucks and thinking I was a grad student, just like this, 30 years ago. I was chuckling to myself about that," said the other.

Finding their own teaching experience verified theoretically was particularly stimulating for two respondents. "I loved it! I loved reading and writing and getting feedback. I knew the practical but not the theory. I was learning the theory. It was so interesting to me," said an experienced public school teacher. "It was very interesting to read the theory about the profession after practicing it for 30 years. So much of the theory is right on," said another.

Being able to integrate their prior practical experience with their new theoretical perspectives was transforming for some respondents. For one, this integration overcame the initial disappointment of finding herself in a large class when she had expected small seminars.

> In my first class [of 60 students] I did a lot of reflecting. It was good in a lot of ways. It helped me to resolve issues on my former job. It allowed me to reflect on what about the job didn't work and where I was effective and not effective. It forced me to examine my leadership skills. It was one of the plusses of this large class, which I hated.

Some felt out of place among their younger colleagues and with younger professors initially. "At first, I felt like a welcomed guest," one said. Not knowing how to approach classroom discussions presented a dilemma for several respondents, who felt they had offended others without meaning to. "I spoke my mind and would make connections no one else would make. I didn't change my role much [later], but it was harder for [youngers] to understand my frame of reference," one recalled. Another respondent tried to explain his

apprehension: "I remember the first class on the first day. It felt very weird to be on the other side of the desk again...It was not the same anxiety as adults coming to do their undergrad work where they think they can't handle the studying and the youngers are so smart. I had no doubt I could do the work. It was more feeling out of place."

Acclimating

Although nearly all respondents rated themselves "much more" or "slightly more" capable academically than their younger classmates, almost half of them wondered about their ability to do the work. Doubts they expressed ranged from mild to overwhelming. One respondent worried about how she would appear to others in the classroom, wondering if she would have "something legitimate and worthy to say or research." Another likened this anxiety to a test. "At first, I wondered if my brain had turned to mush. Could I hold my own? The first semester was a testing of self."

Stryker (1985) found that women question their competence as they go through the program, primarily because they are unsure of their right to be there. One female respondent wondered if seeking a doctorate had been a mistake.

> At first I was scared. I didn't know if I had done the right thing. It was academia. People are so into themselves. This was like a convent where they make you feel like nothing. I had a friend drop out because she was made to feel like an idiot...that lasted a year. I felt doubts about it. Was I going to be able to do it?

One male respondent gave a possible explanation for his anxiety. "It was overwhelming in the sense of all was new again. It had been 15 years since I'd been in school," he said.

That early concern for their abilities also may be attributable to unfamiliarity with the culture, the ways things are done in educational doctoral programs. "Chilly climate" and an inability to acclimate to academia were important factors in the 31% attrition rate of professional schools in the Nerad and Miller study (1996). At least two researchers recommended departmental efforts geared to aiding the disciplinary and graduate life socialization of education doctoral students (Valentine, 1987; Golde, 1998).

Many respondents in this study complained about feeling "in the dark" and not knowing how to receive enlightenment. "I wish I had had insight into how the system works,"

said one. "I had to figure that out myself, bit by bit." Another wished there had been "a road map of how we do things here." Another was more blunt. "So much about the process is 'guess what I'm thinking.' It drives me up the wall. I don't even know what questions to ask."

These feelings of frustration, which they attributed to a lack of guidance in academic culture and procedures, persisted throughout their first two years, the focus of this study. Several researchers (Bair & Haworth, 1999; Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Golde, 1998) reported that doctoral student concerns about a lack of procedural and academic guidance were related to a higher attrition. Dinham (1999) and Whitman (1985) recommended a clarification of roles and expectations to improve doctoral programs and reduce student stress. Hagedorn (1993) suggested that "Faculty should not assume that mature students naturally know how to alleviate academic deficiencies" (p. 14).

Although age itself has not been identified as an important factor in attrition (Valentine, 1987), writing and reading were common early stumbling blocks with this study's sample. Most respondents had held management or teaching positions and were familiar with and proficient in the communication skills of business and public schools. Yet, a significant number of them were surprised to discover academia had its own demands, which they felt unprepared to meet. Those who had MAs in education fared no better, or worse, than their student colleagues holding masters degrees in other disciplines.

"My previous writing was business writing, meaning very short and not much academic development," said a former bank executive. "I had to figure out, 'Oh, I gotta write more stuff.' People assume you know how." Learning how "to be analytical" posed problems for another respondent. "They never taught you how to write a paper...I know some people leave [at proposal stage] because they can't do the writing." "Just the notion of writing drafts for papers and practicing. No one ever said to do an outline and draft and get feedback." Feedback on the final paper is not enough, said another respondent.

> There needs to be classes, maybe a series of three, to tell you about advanced writing skills. Most of the time, a paper was the final in a course. I would get it back with comments, and that's it. It would be great to write a draft and then get it back and re-do it. I'm not going to worry about comments on a paper I'm done with and got an A in the course. I'm on to the next one.

Researching and reading journal articles gave other respondents trouble.

> I didn't know how to read research. Everything in the article was important to me. I needed to learn how to read hard research., to find the question, then how to get at the answer. I didn't know what to ask and I felt I didn't understand the genre or the language.

Even more frustrating, especially to those students who previously had been successful in business and professional positions, was the confusion about classroom culture. "I marvel at classmates who are quite careful in what they say. I'm forthright. I get passionate about things. But I'm not admired for it. I get a sense that 'that's not the way we do things'," said one. "In Education, you are supposed to 'make nice," said another. He related an early classroom experience.

> We were in class discussing curriculum...and I had the nerve to step all over a comment another student made. It was a female member and I was even accused of sexism. But then someone else in the class pointed out that I was like that with everyone, an 'equal opportunity offender'.

Some female students were also criticized for outspokenness. One had an ongoing discussion with one of her male professors. "He said in class I was 'too dominant' in the discussions. So, I paid attention to that and then I went back and told him that I didn't talk any more than any of the others. He agreed, but he said I talked too long." Another was approached for a similar reason, but by another female student who approached her on behalf of several other women in the class. The female peer asked this respondent to pause longer before answering the professor's questions, "so we can answer some questions. We need more time." The respondent said she has "learned to walk a line." But she mused that "Women take longer before they speak to answer a question than men."

Another female student summed up the dilemma. "There are a lot of little things you have to get around. You learn to play the game. You learn from other people who have taken the class before you...It seems so secretive. Yet, if you don't know it, you lose out. There is such a protocol for everything."

Some respondents wished for faculty mentors. Nerad and Miller (1996) and Heinrich (1995) pointed out that mentoring was not the same as advising, and one respondent agreed. "My advisor was not a mentor," said a female respondent. "If I had had one, I would have understood more about the process. I would have liked a female faculty member as a mentor,

but that wasn't there." Erickson (1996) found that women doctoral students did not get mentored and lacked close relationships with their professors. Female to female student-major professor relationships yielded significantly higher quality ratings than inter-gender pairings, according to Schroeder and Mynatt (1993). Having few role models to demonstrate being female and a professional was one dilemma Stryker (1995) said contributed to women doctoral students' role ambiguity.

Peer mentoring programs do not always solve the problem of cultural integration, as some respondents discovered.

> My guy was a total jerk. I didn't meet him in person until years later; we only talked on the telephone. He told me, 'Get your classes and get out.' That was it. My advice on that mentor program is not to have people do it unless they are going to take it seriously. I don't know why my guy did it at all.

Unlike that student, most respondents who found enlightenment about the academic culture and the process involved in their programs gained it through their student peers. One respondent became involved with the grad student organization and found "I learned more about the 'ins and outs' from other students than any other group." Another was assisted by a younger student in one of her professional organizations.

> Not knowing what classes to take, it helped being in [professional organization] because there were a couple students who are also in the program. But it's the blind leading the blind...Talking with this other woman who is seven years younger than I and working on her PhD. We'd sit and talk a lot. She knew where she was going. I didn't. But she'd say, "Well, what about this?" and she'd help me explore.

Others created their own peer groups from classmates. "We had lunches and met with each other. We figured out what to do and shared information, so that brought us together." One respondent simply eavesdropped. "My classmates - I scamper for information from them. I try to overhear conversations. I'm a commuting student, so it's even more difficult."

Group work

Seeking program and procedural input from peers was one thing. Working with peers in the classroom to accomplish assignments was another. Employing Tinto's Model of College Student Withdrawal, Stage (1985, 1987) found that academic integration positively influences social integration. Tinto (1993) maintained that "some degree of consensus or

sharing of values is a requisite condition for persistence" (p. 105) in college, but that conformity was not. Instead, membership "allows for greater diversity of participation" (p.106). Later, Tinto (1998) reiterated that taking persistence research seriously means "requir[ing] students to become actively involved with others in learning," including "shared, collaborative learning experiences within the classroom" (p. 170).

Ideally, working in groups would seem to present the members with opportunities to participate intellectually and socially, and group work was a classroom component of all studied doctoral programs. However, it was not uniformly acclaimed within this study sample. It presented a frustrating hurdle for some respondents. For others, it became a source of achievement. All relied on their maturity and its accompanying higher level of expertise to acclimate to the collaborative process.

Those who found group work less than satisfying zeroed in on what they perceived as other group members' lack of commitment and/or inferior work ethic. Some older students found themselves in the role of unwilling leader.

> I didn't like the co-op work because it was a chore. My standards are higher, so I didn't like having to "drag folks along." ... I parceled my work and time. Others didn't and I found that frustrating. Usually I took the lead because I couldn't stand waiting for all the others to get their ducks in a row. In my first group, there were six of us. Another woman 20 years younger, but mature, and I took on the task of writing. We told the others if they would get their drafts to us by a certain date, we would write it. So, I produced the final copy with her. I didn't want anything turned in that wasn't good. Only a couple of us stuck to deadlines. I don't know if that was age or maybe just my personality.

Evans & Miller (1997) suggested that faculty could improve the learning environment when students could test new ideas and communicate with others, and group work would seem an ideal method for accomplishing that. However, one respondent, a faculty development administrator at a university medical school, blamed the faculty for group project difficulties.

> Just about every class I had, there was a group project. There is some skill involved in designing it, in providing instructions and goals. Nobody had a clue. It was just "group project" on the syllabus. In those situations, the youngers let us do most of the work, under the guise of (us) being leaders. As a student, I felt it was not my responsibility to teach the others in the group how to do a project. That's what the prof is for.

Several respondents found ways to influence the laggards and gained a sense of accomplishment from the project and from changing the viewpoints of their less motivated group members. In classes having both masters and doctoral students, the respondents doubled their chances of becoming group leaders. They were more mature and they were also more knowledgeable. They felt it fell to them to make the group project successful, and they had to use both tact and pressure in doing so. One mid-life student described her experiences with mixed classes.

> I was in some groups with younger people--late 20s, early 30s--and I think they thought I was a nerd. I was always taking notes and one guy even said, "I'm only doing the bare minimum to get a C." But those my own age were doing like me and we were the nerds. There was support because there were people my age who were like me. I'm conscientious. [To the C-Guy] I said, "I'm doing what I do to get the best grades I can." If there's someone I can't change, I'm not going to fight with someone. But inside, it aggravated me. But there was not a lot I could do. Just do what I have to do.
>
> In another group in another class a male started off not caring, but there were two MAs and three PhDs in the group and he became a hard worker and came up to our level of work!

Another respondent in the same mixed group situations used her informal support group to accomplish class projects. "I always had at least one other person from my support group (in classes). So, we would commiserate and then do what needed to be done. We got better each time. Those of us who had the work ethic would play the leadership role and get the project done."

The "nerd" respondent took a pragmatic tack in summing up her group project experiences.

> You always remember group projects. They are always interesting. In real life, we're going to end up working with people. I learned a tremendous amount in groups, even though they have obstacles. You learn more and it stays with you. In one project we had to go to another college and do interviews -- it is the experience so it never leaves you. It's not like reading. I am a believer in it and projects, so you experience and have to seek out knowledge and learn from each other. Another group project had comparative education and learned about other countries and we had a member from China. What better experience than that?

Although group work was less than fulfilling for some respondents, relationships with younger classmates were seen as problematic by only three respondents. For two of them, it was not the youngers themselves, but the less challenging material that caused the dissatisfaction. "I was with people (in early classes) who had little experience. It was very basic stuff and it was frustrating. I had some classes with MA students who were just out of college, and I didn't have much to share with them," said one. "With few exceptions all of us [doctoral students] had been out there. We were not happy to be in with people having no experience and going for MA. They changed this the next year," another said. A third respondent was disturbed by what she heard was an extremely competitive posture adopted by younger students.

> I was told the undergrads tear out pages of books in the library so they're the only ones who have the information! And I thought, "What kind of place is this?" People didn't want to help each other. They said, "We have to get a better grade than you." The younger students. They're very grade conscious. In my research one time I ran across some information that I knew one of my student colleagues might want. So I gave it to her. And she told me she had some things she would share with me that would help my work. It was three weeks before she could get around to giving it to me.

With those exceptions, fellow students, even those who were much younger and lacking in experience, were not usually cited as causes for frustration. The college students over 70 whom Little (1995) studied spoke of an increased sense of well-being, new attitudes and changes in perceptions of other generations as benefits of learning with youngers. In this study, youngers were more likely to contribute to the feeling of worth and competency as they sought out the older students for advice and/or assistance with course work. "I've been told they like to sit and talk to me because of my 35 years of teaching," said the most experienced teacher of the respondents. "They could say 'I want to try something' and I could say what happened when I did it and now I can also say the theory of why."

"In classes, there was a wide age range. The younger students would come to me about things. I was almost a teacher, informally, of course," another respondent said. "There were some younger people in their 20s, MA students. I could see they didn't get it. They thought all this was just book talk. They hadn't lived it. But they knew how to be students. They came to us (olders) sometimes indirectly. Some would ask, "How does that

apply to where you've been?" " I found I had a lot to contribute because of my past experience that often brought something unique to the class. Especially for the MA students because they didn't have any experience and it was all new." These comments are consistent with Little's (1995) findings that older students can enhance classroom interaction because of their unique knowledge and experience.

Some of the mid-life students enjoyed being with the youngers, yet envied what they had ahead of them. One respondent summed up the emotional conflicts this way.

> They were so smart and so young. I envied them.They may go on to become national authorities or rise in administration. But I knew I would be a teacher. They didn't treat me differently. But they didn't think I was that old, but me looking at them, oh...But then, I had done some things they hadn't. As an older person, I knew a lot of things. I knew the library, time management, speaking to a group, etcetera.

Others liked the recognition the younger students gave them. "It's always a surprise. It's been wonderful. I was accepted. They thought it was so cool. The only comments I would get were like, 'I think it would be neat if my mom went back to school,'" said a mother whose daughter had just gone away to college. Two of the male respondents saw themselves in their younger peers. "There is not much difference between me and them. They are self-confident and motivated and know where they want to go," said one. "Most men are younger. We get along fine. I look younger than I am. I dressed like them and at times I would forget there was an age gap with the other students in the program," said the other.

Taking over the leadership role in class or group situations was tempting for some respondents, who perceived that the younger students expected that of them. "I love helping other people and bringing them to the 'Aha,' so whenever I had a study or small group, it was gratifying to have discussions with youngers who would pose questions that were vexing for them because I could say, 'From my experience...' and watch them say, "Oh, yeah...". Mine was a very leadership role because of my experience and what I brought to the class," one respondent said.

Other mid-lifers said they had to be careful of overshadowing their less experienced classmates. "I caught myself trying to take over the lead in groups at first, but then I

consciously stepped back and let them do it, and they did it," said one. Another recalled her conscientious development as an older doctoral student in a group of younger MAs.

> We had work to do together and as the only doc student I made sure I didn't trample on them. I had a great time. The faculty had the responsibility for all of it, and I didn't have to do that. It was wonderful! We all made sure we put in to the group. Either there were no leaders or all of us were.

One respondent, working on her second PhD, humorously summed up her conflicts in working with younger peers who looked up to her.

> I get feedback about my comments being meaningful. We're taking stats now and the prof is not teaching very well so they have looked to me to help explain the concepts. So there is an evolving expectation that I'll say something intelligent, which is pressure on me because I do say some stupid things.

Faculty

In their meta-synthesis, Bair and Haworth (1999) noted that "the single most frequently occurring finding" influencing student persistence was the positive relationship between doctoral student and faculty or advisors (p. 9). Hagedorn and Doyle (1993) found that older female doctoral students have different relationships with faculty than their younger counterparts. In their study of professors' influence on graduate students, Aguinis, Nesler, et. al. (1996) reported the students' satisfaction with their professors was highest when the student felt accepted, valued, and approved by the professor and important to her or him. In Broyles and Nye's (1999) study of school administrators in doctoral programs, respondents, some of whom were in mid-life, cited faculty lack of recognition or a devaluation of their professional experience as the number one negative in their doctoral studies classes. These findings differ from those of Towles and Spencer (1993), who saw no significant difference in completion rates of adult education community college students among those receiving or not receiving faculty-initiated attention. This may signify one difference between undergraduate adult learners and adult doctoral students.

In this study, respondents' perceptions of their relationships with professors and their professors' attitudes towards them as older students ranged from happily compatible and collaborative to competitive and difficult. Some respondents found the entire range within their own faculty.

Some professors used the experiences of the olders in the classroom, taking them in almost as junior profs or as living examples of theories that work. Respondents who had that experience said they enjoyed it.

> I feel well-treated, which is a huge contrast to my first PhD program [25 years ago, when she was in her 20's], where we were 'scum of the earth.' Here, they treat us as having lots of competency.

> The profs have difficulty shutting us up. I think they like it that we are so active. Treating us like interested adults, it's like an aura that permeates the program. The profs. are engaged in an exploration with us. We feel free to disagree. People are encouraged to find their own take on a topic, rather than accept the professor's view.

> In classes with PhDs, sometimes they would ask us to share our experiences and information so we might have had an edge [over the youngers in forming relationships with the professors].

> Because I had a lot of experience, they would give me more of a role in the class. For example, during a session on adult ed., they asked me to run it. I thought it was great.

Two of the male respondents, who had considerable time in corporate before entering their doctoral programs, found the transition to academe involved subtle cultural shifts. One respondent caught himself taking over, as if he were in his business situation.

> In my first class, I found myself almost slipping into that stereotypical student who knows more than the professor. But I caught myself and I asked the profs to let me know if they thought I was doing that. They said I wasn't, but they used me and those others with lots of experience. It validated some of what they were saying with the younger students.

> Only one or 2 were odd, off or very different and we didn't connect. All in all, 3 of 4 committee members are friends now, not just profs. Especially my chair. But he still made me focus and kept me on track. Our relationship was more peer than student. The faculty knew they had a very engaged unit and they loved that. I would ask questions and take part. I was from corporate so I would tell them, "don't try to put that over on me" and we would negotiate..."

This respondent at first said the olders did not get different treatment than the younger students. Then, he added, "Well if anything, they sometimes expected more from the older ones and they usually got it."

Other respondents noticed that some faculty members pushed the older students harder and demanded more of them, especially once they became acquainted. "They have a tiered set of expectations, even some of my student colleagues say so, and mine are set higher," said one respondent. "They knew I knew how to do surveys, for example, so when I said I could do that for my dissertation, they wouldn't let me."

"They don't treat me different than the youngers," another respondent began. Then, she recalled a situation that contradicted her statement.

> But one time, all the others got to do what they wanted [in a project] and he asked me to do the final report, so in that sense, I was treated differently because of my experience. He wanted it to be written well. I would have liked to do another thing, but in the long run, I didn't mind. Playing to your abilities and strengths in a team is one of the principles of the course. When I got youngers' work, I could see why. And it came out well.

Another respondent credited the "support and respect" faculty gave her to her work ethic, more than to age.

> My advisor had high regard for me and relied on me for certain things. I don't know if it was age. I think other students who did the work had the same respect. For those students who were young and unsophisticated, I think some profs were maybe condescending. But I don't think my age had anything to do with it. I think I had talent and I worked hard.

Another respondent overcame what could have been professorial leniency because of her age by speaking up.

> One professor in a class and I had lots of conversation because a paper she wanted would have been ridiculous for me to do because of my experience. [She thought it was too easy.] So, they had to come up with different things for me at times. I had to look for challenges and the profs would give me ideas. I got along with all of them really well.

This respondent also did not hesitate to bring her practical experience into theoretical classroom discussions. "None of the profs had taught as long as I," she explained. "I had practical experience. They had theory. We had a lot of interesting discussions!"

Another respondent acknowledged that older students could be more insistent. "Because of our age, there is a real consumer attitude among the students. We're spending lots of money and we want good instruction and effective. We are more demanding."

Some respondents said faculty members seemed uncomfortable with them, treating them differently because of it.

> I am older than some of them. I learned to be a little more tolerant. Only one took himself too seriously. I might have had a slightly higher degree of respect [because of age]. I got good grades. Halfway through the research process I thought, "Why would I want to join these people?" [Become a professor].

> The younger ones, I'm older than two of them. It's not a problem, but I sense an awkwardness with them that they are not sure what to do with me. They are polite, but they don't let loose with me, like they do with the younger students. The professors, especially with me, don't want to waste their time with me. They figure they'll get more reflection from the younger ones because they will go on to become stars in the community and we older ones are less likely. [It's] an aggregate of who they spend their time with. The profs will answer my questions politely and then it's clear I can leave. They engage the younger ones in conversation. The department spends money on the younger ones in fellowships, and assistantships, for example. The older ones who got them, got them in another department, not in ours.

Two respondents were disappointed in the quality of the faculty instruction in their classes.

> I was shocked with the lack of teaching skills. There is no sense of their preparation, for example. I know they are experts in their topic, but there is no sense of how to draw in the experiences of the adults in the class. They were fairly decent in dissertation advice. But organizing a course and what students need to know, I don't think they understand competencey-based education!

The other suggested that faculty should practice what they preached because they did not employ current best practice.

Not surprisingly, some respondents found relationships between faculty and themselves varied with the individual and the individual professor.

> There are two individuals (one man, one woman) who have been responsible for the program and have a big stake in it and spend lots of time in it. I've spent more time with her. I've struggled to establish a relationship with him and am finding it difficult. But having women professors and African-American professors is a new experience. My history prof is a young woman and I hope to do follow up with her because women in leadership roles interests me. Talking about their expertise and interests, I enjoy that.

A former administrator, who enrolled in her program in order to advance in her career, said her faculty advisor was "pushing me big time to be a scholar and not go into

administration." Once she decided to pursue a professorial career, she said their relationship changed. "Before I made it clear to him I wanted to be faculty, he was not willing to mentor me at all. But now, it makes perfect sense because he knows nothing about administration. Why would he mentor me about it?"

On the questionnaire, when participants were asked to write a message to the doctoral program faculty at their institution, one fourth asked for their professors' understanding of students' lives and experiences. "Value diversity and experience," said one respondent. "We are not all the same and our choices should be respected." "Grad students are people, too. Don't give us the dual message tht we're colleagues during the term but students when it comes time to mark our papers. Treat us consistently and humanely," pleaded another. "Try to take a personal interest in your students," said another. "Learn about the needs and desires of 'older' students, especially women," wrote another. "We'd like to have clearer deadlines, perhaps requirements for faculty to respond to our messages, papers, etc. within a set time frame." "Please put yourself in the students' place," pleaded another. And, with the hindsight of a completed doctorate, came the weary entreaty of a recent graduate. "Faculty tried to jam us into full time classes, three per semester, while all of us were working full time. Coach students on a reasonable balance. Encourage students working full time to go slower."

Coping With the Trinity of Doctoral Student Life

Tinto (1993) maintained that external elements in the continuing process of attending college may support or detract from persistance. Stability supports persistance, but instability does not necessarily detract from it.

In this study sample, the commonly recognized external elements are work and family. In addition, crises are embedded within those elements. In mid-life, these crises include: long-time health of self and family; death of family, mentors, friends; injury accidents and short-term illness of self, family; divorce; transitions of parents (changing residence or entrance into long-term care facility) and children (empty nest - off to college or marriage). Because mid-life, "sandwich generation" students are also often financially and/or emotionally responsible for family members, as well as themselves, these crises demand

instantaneous attention that may detract from or derail the student's studies or even continuation. The unpredictable nature of most crises makes them more significant and stressful.

In his study of first year doctoral students in their 20s and 30s, Valdez (1982) discovered 48% experienced crises, called "life events," which necessitate a change in behavior in order to adapt or cope with the event. For the younger students in Valdez' sample, the three most frequently mentioned events involved work, personal or social issues. Although the percentage number of crises or "life events" of mid-life doctoral students was the same, the types of crises were quite different. Ten of the respondents in this sample experienced at least one crisis during the first two years of their doctoral program, and the three most frequently mentioned events were the three least frequent in the Valdez sample: Illness of self or family member or death of family member, marital, and family (ie. empty nest). That the doctoral students in this study remained in the program could be credited to their integration. It could also be credited to the external influences that influenced their decision to enter a program and that still remain integral to their lives.

This section discusses how the respondents viewed their usual external elements and their crises and what they did to adjust their lives in order to cope with expected and unexpected elements.

Adjusting Their Lives

A "reasonable balance" eluded many of this study's participants, as it did for the "early leavers" in Golde's study (1998). For older students, education is only one of several competing priorities (Hazzard, 1993). Half of the respondents cited balancing work, family and school as one of their three most pressing concerns when they entered their doctoral programs. For most of them, this turned out to be prophetic as they moved through the coursework and into candidacy. Demands of all three became nearly overwhelming for some students. Dinham (1999) found that doctoral completion was hindered by financial, familial, cultural, and internal relationship factors, and this study sample offered additional insight regarding those factors. This section explores the trinity of doctoral student life and the respondents' attempts to integrate school, work and family. Some were successful most of

the time. Some were successful some of the time. None were successful all of the time. Their self-analyses provided some of the most interesting and insightful data of this study.

In her study of non-traditional community college students, Allison (1995) noted that "These students are constantly making transitions between their separate worlds of family, work and student life" (p. 3). The doctoral students in this study sample would undoubtedly echo that sentiment. This section examines what it was it like to be a doctoral student, a working professional and a member of the "sandwich generation" all at once, and how these mature individuals found themselves learning to walk, work and chew gum at the same time. Most realized early that they had created an impossible situation in assuming their lives could continue as before, with only some studying and writing added. Something would have to give.

School

"I had fantasies about being full time and going to the rec center to work out and going to the performing arts," said one respondent about her enthusiasm for going back to school. "But it became, 'when is the next paper due?' I was literally printing it on the printer while I was getting dressed to go to school. I overdid! I took more than I needed to take. I was searching for that community of scholars. I lived the monk's life, just study and eat."

This respondent is another example.

> I took too heavy a course load with working. We were on a treadmill the first year, had to take a full time course load. At the end, I had incompletes and then took another year to make them up. I took classes for two years, then the third year I finished my incompletes. At first, I liked the course work, but also was frustrated with the unreasonable load and the lack of information about the program and processes. I never kept up with three classes. I could do one. Two were almost impossible. So, I let the research for my classes go and did my work in class. Then I went back and caught up with my research. Those who stayed active to do the three courses got so far behind they never made it through.

Family

Allison (1995) posited that the transition rite experienced by traditionally aged college students separating from family and home environment did not apply to adult students. Although older students may not be leaving their parental homes as they enter doctoral programs, they do encounter separation from family, friends, and former lifestyles, if only

because the demands of doctoral studies leave little time for any but the most necessary former social and familial obligations. Forty-two percent of the science, engineering and sociology doctoral students studied by Anderson and Swazy (1998) said they were bothered "always or usually" that their studies interfered with their personal lives. Berger & Milem (1997) found that activities, including family involvement, which drew undergraduate students away from college had negative effects on persistence, but that involvement with faculty and peers had positive effects. Bean and Metzner (1985) noted that older college students were more influenced by outside environmental factors than their younger peers.

Family demands for people in mid-life are different than those for younger students. Children typically are grown or at least old enough, as one respondent said of her high schoolers, "for unsupervised baths." The care necessary for younger children is usually not an issue for this age group. Yet, even older children demand time and attention. College choice, enrollment and adjustment are typical demands for mid-life parents. And some in this age group are grandparents. "I have grandkids by my husband. I can't spend a lot of time and it breaks my heart," said one respondent. With this "sandwich generation," their own, often elderly, parents may experience health crises. Siblings and extended family members are also older than those of the traditionally aged graduate student. Spouses and significant others have to go through adjustments of time and responsibilities as the doctoral student becomes more engrossed in studies. This family strain is related to the psychological strain graduate students experience in various ways (Gilbert, 1982).

One newly married respondent wished her husband happy first anniversary. "And he said, 'I thought you forgot we were married,'" she said. The potential for family crisis is certainly there. Findings about the effects of health, family and crises on doctoral student persistence are inconclusive (Bair & Haworth, 1999), yet these influences cannot help but affect the students' lives and studies. In mid-life, these influences become pronounced. As one respondent who experienced several family health crises put it, "These things happen more typically in our 50s. We don't have just ourselves to worry about." And ten of the 20 respondents experienced at least one significant nadir.

Divorce or final separation occurred for four of eleven married respondents, two men and two women, during their doctoral programs. Two said it may not have been a direct

result of their doctoral work, but could have resulted from the partners moving in different directions.

Her divorce was probably a result of the doctoral work, one respondent mused. "My friend said it was totally predictable because I was flying and he was not ready to start a new life." Sheehy (1995) stated that a "fundamental shift" towards independence and "repossessing their intellectuality and originality of thought" is common to women in mid-life.

But men in this study sample also experienced the effects of newly discovered intellectuality. "I got divorced. After 25 years. Both of us were pursuing advanced degrees and that meant time away from each other. We grew strong, but individually and apart," said one respondent. "It was not really the PhD," said another of his divorce. "But old issues came to a head. Even a strong marriage would have problems in this kind of program. This [intense work] was bigger than even I thought." Another respondent plans to divorce after completing the program and becoming self-supporting.

Two were involved in auto accidents that left them injured. Two dealt with illness or death of family members. "My brother in law died. I took an incomplete in a course. It took me a year to get back to that course," one respondent recalled.

Some feared becoming ill. Two became very ill and one felt close to a life-threatening illness. Some of these health crises could be attributed to stress and lack of healthy lifestyle that time crunches tend to produce. One respondent said,

> I drank lots of coffee to keep going. My advisor prided himself on getting as much from students as he could. So I wrote 50 papers in one year. So what? Working at that level for any length of time will make you sick. I was in danger of getting diabetes. I realized I was on a fast track to a big health problem.

Eating on the run or not at all and eating unhealthy food were other often-cited examples.

Giving up exercise, which several respondents said they had done, could have significantly reduced their abilities to deal with increased demands on time and energy and resulted in illness. One respondent worried about negatively affecting not only her health, but her husband's as well.

> We used to run and do athletic things and when I started [the doctoral program] that all stopped. My fear is that our health was compromised. Things that keep you in shape and we stopped. We do mostly everything together. That health factor is the thing that concerns me the most. He had an angiogram last year. It came out ok, but I worry.

Another respondent who had given up a regular exercise regimen discovered that her stamina had deteriorated so far she was almost to the point of no return. "I had not been exercising, and I got recruited for a study on walking. The researcher told me that she had doubts about taking me in the study because I was barely capable of being in the program," she said. After six months in the walking program, she had improved to the "fitness range," but was still not where she had been when she began her doctoral studies.

Another respondent longed for a return to a forsaken exercise habit. "I had slacked on my fitness and running. I had been a runner for 25 years, but something had to give. I gained 20 pounds from eating on the run and not very well." He cautioned those considering entrance into a doctoral program. "People need to be very cautious of their health. If you are not in good shape at the beginning, you'll be in trouble."

Coping With the Expected and Unexpected

Respondents used a variety of techniques in attempting to find, if not a balance in their studies, professions and families, at least a tolerable equilibrium. This section reveals their intentions, their successes and their self-evaluations in their attempts to maintain a life both outside and within their doctoral programs. Erickson (1996) noted that in her study sample of four female educational doctoral students, all enlisted only external support to cope with what they felt was a power structure they could not change. In this study sample, both external and internal coping mechanisms were employed by students of both genders.

Exercise as coping mechanism

Although several respondents gave up their exercise routines in order to claim the time for doctoral studies, two male respondents said they used exercise as a coping mechanism. One of them began his exercise program before he began classes, forseeing that he would need more physical stamina.

"I started working out daily to lose weight so I could compete better," he said. "I lost 38 pounds. It was important to me to be on time for class while I was working. I had to run

across the parking lot. I needed to become physically fit. No one in our program talks about physical fitness, and I think they should. It is as important as learning computers." After he became immersed in his doctoral studies, he found a unique and healthy means of self-motivation. "I give myself rewards when I complete a paper or do a demanding workout. I go to a health spa. Get the works," he said.

Work: leaving, reducing, bargaining

Giving up outside work responsibilities was a lesser-used strategy for balancing time. Only three members of this response group left their jobs in order to concentrate on their doctoral programs. All three are women; two are single. One, who had earned a comfortable income, was going to change jobs, anyway, so decided to move back to her home state and take some time off to pursue doctoral studies instead. Another saved enough money while she was in corporate to quit her job and pursue her dream of becoming a faculty member in a small liberal arts college near her hometown. The third stayed in a less-than-satisfactory public school position in order to qualify for a leave of absence, which she took to devote full time to her studies.

One respondent, who kept her job, but knew a woman who quit to go back to school, said

> I think it's easier for women because men have put all their eggs in their one basket for so long. And women value change of experience. They are used to having more experiences. If a man puts a burden on his family because he quit a good job to do this, it's very difficult for him. It's the way they perceive themselves as breadwinners.

Several respondents had been encouraged to enroll in the doctoral program by their superiors. One talked about an unwritten understanding between his superior and him.

> I had my boss's support and he understands. The president is supportive and he said, 'Go ahead; we want you to do it.' The tradeoff is that there is no tuition support. The unwritten agreement is that they leave me alone as long as I'm in the doctoral program.

Six respondents found ways to maintain their professional lives while keeping up their scholarly responsibilities. One commuter student used vacation time to extend her study hours and to work on longer research projects. "I would go up and stay at [a motel]. It was a safe place for me. They fussed over me there. I would read, go to the library, took my

computer. Got lots of work done. The take-home part of the comps I did in one week that way. My chair would meet with me there." Another commuter student stayed with friends on weekends near her institution and relied on her "very good assistant" at work to assume some extra responsibilities in order to free up her time.

Others relied on assistants or colleagues, shifting some of their professional work load or learning to let go of "type A" perfectionism in their jobs. "I've had to take a different approach to work. To let some things go and be less absorbed," said a female respondent, adding, "That's good because I was too focused on work and couldn't seem to refocus." Another, a full time administrator who was also teaching two courses, found that he could not also keep up his three-courses-per-semester doctoral program. He gave up the administration and kept the teaching assignments, noting that his spouse and he "limped along economically one year." Another, a professor, had a one-course release as a program coordinator, which gave him "more flexibility in my schedule."

A flexible schedule that allowed two quarters a year off his teaching responsibilities and a liberal use of email in place of meetings gave a community college teacher almost enough time. He freed up some more hours by cutting back on the assignments he gave his students "so there's not as much to grade." He and two other male respondents found they were doing the same work as before, but they were doing it at different hours. One, a community college dean, commented on maintaining "a political balance at work. To be sure all my faculty and department chairs knew what page I was on."

School: organizing and collaborating

Most of the respondents already had developed organizational skills in their professional lives, and time management became critically important. All respondents had ways of coping with their course loads that involved both time and location dimensions. Some kept systematic notes and calendars of due dates and progress points. Early mornings, late evenings and weekends were filled with reading and writing. Some created special work locations at home; others designated hours at the office before or after work. Some made the campus library a study hall. One found that on-line researching and emails to librarians who located materials for her saved her hours of commuting to the library. "We can't do that on a short turnaround time, so have to decide early on my topic and my materials," she said.

Two commuting students made a specific hotel their place to work and study. "I tried to arrange my classes back to back so I could drive in one day, stay at a motel and go back the next day. My sister works for a hotel chain, so I could stay for $29 a night, and it costs me $10 to drive. I used that time to go to the library. I do two days' work on campus," said one woman. One respondent described her life this way:

> I have a calendar and keep it for every hour of the day. I'm up at 6:30. I went to (college), taught class. I would teach two courses, go to my sister's condo with my lunch and do my reading. She would be at work, so it was quiet. Maybe I would take a 20 minute nap. Then I would go to (doctoral institution) and take two classes, from 4:30 to 10 p.m. Then, go home, eat dinner, go to bed and get up and do it again. That was during my residency. Weekends were for reading and writing papers. There was no time for anything else, ever. At one time, we had to read a book a week and do a paper a week, and some days I didn't know how I was going to do it. You just have to make some sacrifices.

One of the two respondents who has children at home found ways to organize her study time around their schedules.

> If the kids were in school, I studied. We commuted, so I would just go there and stay all day. Or I would stay home all day alone and study. Here I have a son in private school, so I would take him to school and spend the day in the library, just like it was work, so I came home in the evening and had family time.

One of the nine married women said, "As we are older, we have more to do." She said she deals with it by not doing it all.

> My house is a disaster. The garden was the second thing to go. Stats did that. It was 5 afternoons a week plus homework plus exams. At that point, I just let it all go and dug in. When things are not going well, I read novels.

Bair and Haworth (1999) noted in their meta-synthesis that, "With only two exceptions, researchers who included interpersonal involvement and participation in academic life found them to be significant [to retention]" (p. 11). In order to deal with particularly challenging material or courses, some participants in this study joined or created study groups. A full time public school teacher was one of them.

> In some classes, a couple of us would meet before class and discuss because we had small classes and you see the same people over and over. So, we'd go to dinner before or after class and talk about it. We shared books and helped

> each other a lot. It helped me and another woman who is a full time teacher especially, because we are not at the university all day [like the others are].

Statistics was often mentioned as an intense and demanding course in which teaming up with classmates proved valuable. "I put together a study team of people my age. We did a competency check of each other. Some knew a lot about one thing, some about another. We all finished except one of us," said one respondent.

Socialization within the program

Spady's (1970) two-element definition of social integration included "the establishment of close relationships with others in the system" (p. 77). Tinto's model (1975) contained six components, one of which included the academic and social systems of the institution. Hagedorn (1993) found that social integretion increased the likelihood of persistence of older female graduate students. Bean & Metzner (1985) placed social integration with peers and faculty on a lower level of importance for non-traditional students than environmental variables. Nevertheless, some respondents thought socialization was an important component of their program, whether it was present or absent. Cohorts facilitated commeraderie. This is not surprising, especially among non-traditional students. Cunningham (1996) pointed to results in the adult education graduate program at Northern Illinois University that showed a huge recruitment increase of "marginalized" and international students after cohort groups were developed.

Education doctoral participants in this study said that work study groups sometimes became social groups, as well. "We [study team] helped each other cope. Staying focused and listened to each other. [Other members] had the same situation. Friendships. Almost a therapy group," said one respondent. Another respondent compared the social atmosphere of his education program with a doctoral program in another discipline. "[In the other discipline] the people in the second year don't even know the first year people. But the School of Ed., you see chats and hi in the hall. In the [other] school, it's a grim corporate culture. Here, folks are interested in each other."

> One respondent reached out to the youngers in his classes, with pleasant results.
>
> I made a point of doing things to increase contact with them. I had my work study group over to my house. They got to know me a little more. Now there

> is a social network that helped me through difficult times. I've been to homes, parties, sometimes I'm seen as a big brother and it's comfortable.

Allison (1995) found that faculty can assist in peer integration. An advisor created an atmosphere of support among his advisees, one respondent recalled.

> He played a major role in turning his advisees into support groups. He had Saturday meetings and discussions. He drew you in early, so we bonded and became a support group. He was the only person in the department who did that. The rest of the faculty resented that he did it because they didn't want to be that committed to their students.

Commuting students must make a special effort to be included in social activities and may not integrate into their departments as easily as full time students (Golde, 1998). One respondent, who lived 100 miles from her campus, said, "I drove up for parties and such because I wanted to be in the group, but there is a big difference from being on campus every day and only once a week." Another respondent complained about social activities held during the day. "I think they leave out people who don't want to give up their jobs. Why can't they do things at 4:00 p.m.?" One respondent, who had done her MA program at her current doctoral institution, had been left out of activities because "the younger ones thought I was a doctoral student and they never invited me to get-togethers. Once I was into my second year [as a doctoral student], we had group projects and I got to know people."

Family

Graduate study impacts families in different ways. Some differences are gender related (Gilbert, 1982; Stryker, 1985; Hagedorn, 1993). Married women experience the most stress as they attempt to adjust their time and energies. The "superwoman" do-it-all syndrome results in "role overload" and its accompanying "reactive role behavior," when women accept the new role as an addition without attempting to negotiate a lessening of other responsibilities (Stryker, 1985). Although a dysfunctional family may contribute to academic failure, a supportive and functional family generally seems to adapt (Gilbert, 1982). Family support was not a significant factor in doctoral persistence in at least one study (Hagedorn, 1993). Yet, doctoral students in the study by Broyles and Nye (1999) cited family as their number one source of support.

Family encouragement to stay influenced 80% of adult community college students to remain at their institutions (Okun, Benin & Brandt-Williams;1996), and familial support was critical for many of the students in this study. Support of family members was mentioned by nine of the 11 married respondents in this study. Six respondents stated this support was important to their continued success in the program. Some family members assumed responsibility for household chores; some served as "cheerleaders."

One of the two married women in the sample who had children at home said, "My family was great. My daughter would leave encouraging notes on my computer. My kids would make me tea. My husband has an advanced degree and works in the field, so he understands the process." The other married respondent with children at home did her school work during week days and left time for her family on evenings and weekends. "I made a commitment to myself to take both weekend days off at first," she said. After the first few courses, she saved only one of those days "when I don't look at [school] stuff."

For two respondents, a spouse was actively involved.

> He reads my papers and is good at finding the grammatical errors and editing. If he doesn't understand something I wrote, I re-do it. He will sit and listen to me talk about my work because he knows that's how I learn. We drive to and from work daily and we talk or he reads a chapter to me.

But this shared interest proved to be a detriment for one of the respondents, whose husband is also in an educational doctoral program. "(Mr.) and I undermine each other sometimes. We want to share interesting things about what we're learning and doing, and that takes lots of time."

Rigor of it all

However they coped, none of them said it was easy. Most respondents indicated their first years' experience in their doctoral program was challenging, emotionally and physically draining, at times even overwhelming. They had different ways of expressing their acceptance of the demands it made.

"Once you commit, you just do it and get it done. I guess I'm a workaholic. It came very close to a 24, 7. You don't have a life. On Saturday and Sunday, you work all day."

"Just do it. I'm not one of those who thinks about that. In my upbringing, we never played until the work was done, so I've always worked. I wasn't afraid of that."

"From 9 to 5 I had to be there with my advisor. (She was a grad assistant). I got one afternoon off a week. I did my work through the night and on weekends. That's your life."

One respondent summed up the doctoral experience. "I just put my head down and keep my feet moving. During one year I didn't do anything but work, study, sleep."

Another respondent summed hers up differently.

> A lot of people said to me, who may be considering going back to school, they thought what I did was amazing. But it's not how smart you are. You need to be smart, but it's much more organizational skills to complete the process. It has to do more with time management. I was in labor with my first child for 33 hours. I learned patience and that if I worked at something long enough I could deliver. I had something I had to do. I knew if I kept at it, it would be there.

Transitions, Transformations and Ahas

Some mid-life doctoral students noted changes in themselves and their ways of thinking. For some, this change was a conscious transition. Others said it came upon them like an unplanned and unexpected transformation of purpose or professional perspective. Some respondents recalled bright spots of discovery they termed "Ahas."

Transitions

When changes were expected or planned, they became transitions. Financial and professional transitions were the two examples mentioned by respondents. Because most of the subjects in this study were professionals in well-paid positions before they entered their doctoral programs, they were used to a level of income that allowed them freedoms and luxuries that graduate students normally do not enjoy.

Female doctoral students in one study expressed concerns about finances, yet persisted anyway (Hagedorn, 1993). Consistent with that finding, participants in this study did not express an intent to leave due to financial concerns, although at least two said paying for their studies was difficult. Instead, those who left their jobs or who gave up higher paying responsibilities in order to concentrate on their studies found they needed to make adjustments to accommodate living on savings or a lower salary. One woman who gave up her comfortable income when she left her job and relocated to another state to begin her doctoral studies described her housing and financial transition.

> Before, I was comfortable in my income. I came here and got a high rent townhouse. I thought, "I can handle that rent." I ended up borrowing more

> money my first year. It took a while to get used to scaling back. I had an assistanceship teaching. And I took a job. I've never had a laborer's kind of job, so I said, "I'm going to work at this store 20 hours a week and that will supplement my income a little." And I carried nine units per semester. I look back on that and think, "You stupid fool!" But that just lasted a year. It was my way of making a transition from living quite well to living the life of a grad student. It was so drastic, I had to do it gradually.

In reflecting on her radical lifestyle change, she said, "This is the greatest thing I've ever done. It's difficult financially to give up a lucrative income, but it's been a real eye-opener to realize I don't have to have all that money to be happy."

As described in previous sections on work and family, other respondents made transitions of letting go. A clean house, a manicured garden, golf and other sports, socializing with friends are some examples of previously cherished habits and hobbies that no longer fit in respondents' lives. Van Maanen and Schein (1979, as cited in Anderson & Swazey, 1998) pointed out that graduate school involves shedding some of one's old self and taking on new views as acclimation progresses. Anderson & Swazey (1998) concluded the "graduate school has considerable strength as a change process of the most fundamental kind, for better or for worse" (p. 10). It will be interesting to see if these jettisoned pieces of former lifestyles are retrieved once the doctorate is achieved and respondents return to the lives of professionals. The third phase of this study will include that question.

Transformations and Ahas

Experience by itself does not yield wisdom. Experiential knowledge becomes wisdom when it is understood and transformed (Little, 1995). One respondent, who has since completed her doctoral studies, listed "personal growth - embracing change" as one of her three greatest challenges. Not all changes experienced by respondents were planned or expected. Some shifts in perspective or long-term goals occurred during this first stage of their doctoral programs. Gradual shifts are termed "transformations," while recognition moments are called "ahas."

Although practical career considerations prompted doctoral program entry decisions for most participants, some of whom stated the diploma itself was the goal, those career considerations did not always remain at the top of the list. At some time during the first stage of their doctoral process, usually during the first classes, six experienced a transformation of

purpose. Attaining the doctorate remained a goal, but the intellectual growth prompted a change in perspective among participants.

A community college faculty member compared his outlook before he entered the program to his current perspective, after completing his course work. "I thought at first a PhD was just a piece of paper to hang on the wall, and it meant more money. But now, I think I want a research agenda. What I thought would be a terminal degree that I could turn my back on, now, I'm looking forward to doing it on my own schedule, not theirs."

A former school administrator and counselor noticed a change in her attitude about the process. "As time went on, I thought, 'I could be a professor.' So, I began to perform like one. I began to see my university through 'How do you manage higher ed?" and not as a student going throught the program."

Four respondents experienced a change or potential change in career goals, involving other career options than those they had originally intended to choose or a new way of viewing their current professional situation. "It has opened up another career, one I hadn't thought about, as a professor in higher ed," said an administrator at a liberal arts college. "When I first came, I was going to get my doctorate and go back to administration. I had no idea I would love faculty so much and now I want to do that, plus administration," said another.

> "Somehow, I made a big change midstream," said a former college teacher.
>
> I still don't know what I want to be. I know what I'm interested in, but not necessarily in the same occupation. There's a lot of decision-making when you are coming from a job [to school], especially when you're older. You hit something. It's like a lightbulb. "Oh! I can do something different!" I don't think people realized they could change fields. It's not something that was done 30 years ago.

A faculty member's ability to alter a student depends upon the student's perceptions of the faculty member (Aguinis, H., et al; 1996). If a student feels the faculty member has expertise, is trustworthy, and is positive in the relationship with the student, the faculty member has a better chance of changing the student. Two of the four students who changed their career goals discussed positive faculty relationships, which often included the faculty member giving them special duties or highlighting their expertise, showing they were

valuable and also giving them an opportunity to "shine" in a faculty or mentorship role. One student talked about her advisor's refusal to mentor her until she made it clear to him that she had changed her career goal to that of becoming a faculty member/researcher. Far from feeling slighted by that, she found it a logical reaction on his part.

Some respondents recalled an "aha" moment, a lightbulb flash of insight that occurred during their studies. One respondent described her struggle to find a subject for her first research assignment. After several false starts and discouraging comments from her professor, "one day, I sort of woke up and said, 'there it is!' I guess I had been making all these connections in my mind and it just happened to click."

Connecting past practice to theory resulted in ahas for other respondents. One was a liberal arts college administrator.

> It was very interesting to read the theory about the profession after practicing it for 30 years. So much of the theory is right on. That on governance, management, student life issues. I would say, 'Oh! That explains X or (a person)!' That was one of the eurekas. Another was the history and philosophy of Higher Ed. All our modern issues are really old issues! I think a lot of animosity on campus would drain away if everyone took a course in that.

Another respondent, who had "lots of practical experience" in teaching, described a similar illuminating experience in her theory classes.

> "Oh! So that's where that came from!" I would often think. I don't know if this was a change or transformation, but it gave me confidence because now I could back up what I said and did. I could say to student teachers, 'Well, research shows' instead of saying 'I don't know why I do that.'

Taking some time to reflect after advancing to candidacy, one respondent found her world looked different from when she began her program.

> I know myself better. I have been able to step back from what we get ourselves into when we start a career and how we are so caught up in it. For women, in particular, it is how to be successful as a professional and a wife and mother. How to meet the challenge of growing intellectually and do all these other things at the same time. Before, it was all about being successful and my child being successful. You get in a treadmill and forget who you are as a person. I've had tons of time during this experience to reflect on who I am and what I want. I'm always going to be learning.

Respondents in this study seemed to feel the changes they had experienced in themselves and their goals were for the better. Anderson and Swazey's (1998) science and engineering doctoral students were not as uniformly pleased; nearly one-third said they had changed in ways they did not like.

The relatively small number of respondents in this study who described themselves as having changed may be due to one or two factors. Because this study focused on the early stage of the doctoral program, specifically the first two years, perhaps most respondents were not yet in a position to realize they had changed significantly. If a significant change occurs during the course of an individual's doctoral studies, it would more likely be recognized after the completion, when an individual feels more prone to engage in self-reflection and has the benefit of longer hindsight. Phases two and three of this study will focus on completion of doctoral work and subsequent career moves, possibly providing greater insight to the individual's perception of self-transformation.

Limitations of Findings

This study is limited in several ways. The sample of 21 respondents from ten institutions is not intended to be representative of any one doctoral program or of doctoral programs as a whole. The data, however rich and descriptive they may be, are only as sound as the researcher's care in obtaining them and the respondents' truthfulness in recall and willingness to communicate allow.

Some limitations to reaching absolute truth and clarity include:

- Unconscious researcher bias - Framing of questions in ways that led respondents to answer in ways they thought would please the researcher and/or contribute to the success of the project. This Social Desirability Bias is also a limitation in any self-disclosing data from any respondents.
- Point of view as a research construct – Understanding subjects from their own point of view is both a goal and a limitation because the researcher's understanding may not be the same as that of the subjects themselves. As noted by Bogdan and Biklen, "...intrusion of the researcher on the subjects' world, however, is inevitable in research. After all, the researcher is making interpretations, and must have some conceptual scheme to do this"(p.34).

- Inaccurate and/or incomplete participant recall - Participants are at various stages in their doctoral programs, yet they were recalling what it was like for them during admissions and early coursework stages. Participant recall of events, experiences, and feelings may be diminished and/or altered with time passed.
- Lack of participant observation and field work - Although this technique may be a part of my future and ongoing research in the next phases of this project, all data from participants in this phase were collected in questionnaires and one-on-one telephone interviews with them. Added interpretations achieved through on-site observation in classrooms and study groups, for example, may have been valuable.
- Lack of face to face interaction with respondents – Similar to a lack of participant observation, interviews with participants in this study were accomplished via telephone, thus eliminating additional clues kinesics could have provided.

My attempts to ameliorate those limitations lie in the triangulation of data and in my extensive experience as an interviewer. The symbolic interaction between me and the respondents constructed meaning, and it was my objective to make it as useful and instructional as possible.

Conclusions and Implications

Themes

Four themes related to mid-life educational doctoral students emerged from the data collected in this study. Exemplified by the students in this study sample, mid-life ed doctoral students have a practical outlook, but in a transitional "theoretically practical" way; they require faculty and administrative validation of their previous professional experience; they find their doctoral program entails navigating a rigorous rocky road; they also find and relish the journey of discovery.

Theoretically Practical

Evans and Miller (1997) found that educational doctoral students exhibited most of the adult learning theory characteristics. Like most adult learners, these mid-life students are pragmatic in their approaches to their own education. Like their elders, they are highly

motivated and have a wealth of experience (Little, 1995). They value real world uses of material learned and they want to bring their own experiences to the classroom.

Although most gave self-actualization reasons among the most important incentives for their decision to enter a doctoral program, nearly all of this study's subjects expressed doubts about how they would eventually use the knowledge they gained and the degree they would earn. Some wondered if this doctoral program would be "worth it" at the end. At the early stages of their doctoral experience, while still in course work or just qualified as ABD, they hoped it would "pay off" in increased income, a higher professional level or some other practical way.

In addition to classroom sessions they want to have hands-on experiences and field trips to sites where they can see how theory works and how other institutions are using or not using the principles. They want to be able to evaluate the success or non-success (no one used the word, failure) of the visited institutions in a shared class experience. Whether or not it was specific to a course, individuals would relate the theories to their own previous experience and often described this reflection as an "aha!" experience.

What is unique about this sample at this stage of their doctoral studies is how they perceive their new theoretical knowledge. They enjoy learning the theories and history of education, for example, but they apply that theory to their past real life situations. At this stage of their doctoral studies, they used what they learned about theory to explain, justify, prove their past experiences. They are "theoretically practical," viewing experience as the foundation of theory. First came experience; then came theory. When they begin dissertation work, they will be required to reverse that experience/theory order. It will be interesting to see how they make that shift and what they think about it. Further study focusing on the shift from doctoral students' emphasis on practical to the theoretical would be valuable to understanding the effects and implications of that development.

Validation of Previous Experience

Older students perceive their extensive professional experience in administration and/or education as a plus. Not only do they want to integrate it into their own learning, they also want to contribute in class -- to share situations from their experiences -- and outside of class -- to answer questions from youngers and MA students. Many expressed joys in finding

that the faculty welcome their experiential knowledge and that their younger student colleagues looked up to them because of it. For some older students, this sharing of their professional expertise greatly assisted in their cultural and social integration.

Navigating a Rigorous Rocky Road

From the admission process to the classroom, from the classroom to the rest of their daily lives, from their lives to the study and research processes, mid-life students found the pathways to cultural, social and academic success were fraught with perils. Attempts to decode academia, in all its rites and norms, from the perspective of a business person, an administrator or a public school teacher were usually unsuccessful. They had to figure things out, they had to find people who knew how, they had to make their own ways without "road maps." Their doctoral studies were more rigorous than they had imagined. Their isolation from family and friends was an unexpected requirement for success. They needed to find new support groups and alternative methods of studying, participating and writing. They needed to let go of some familiar ideas and habits and pick up new ones more in synch with the ways things are in academe. As one participant put it, "It's like secret rites of passage. It has been interesting, challenging."

Journey of Discovery

Like a line from "Desiderata," the mid-life doctoral students in this study sample found that despite all its trials and tribulations, it was still a beautiful world and they had a right to be here. After making their ways through the difficulties, adapting and changing, even transforming, they were, for the most part, rather proud of themselves. Even at this pre-candidate stage of their doctoral work, many were able to recognize positive changes in themselves and new opportunities in their careers as a result of their involvement in their doctoral studies. In this early stage of their doctoral program, those who consciously considered their growth and progress were in the minority, probably because they did not yet have the benefits of full integration and were not yet seeing the light at the end of the doctoral tunnel. One respondent, who had completed her coursework and was working on her dissertation, did consider her own progress and was able to see how far she had come. She recommended that contemplation:

> If you are mid-life and enter a doctoral program and you don't examine why you are doing this and what it's all about, you miss the opportunity to grow. If you don't reflect on what you are all about and why you are doing this. I have changed a lot as a person. If I'm not growing, I'm not happy. ...I think anyone going back to school in mid-life has some reflection and can see how much of a growing experience this has been.

Suggestions for Further Research

Although qualitative methodology does not purport to hold generalizability as its primary purpose, findings can be helpful to administrators, faculty members and students in educational doctoral programs in the following ways:

Institutional Research

This study may serve as a model for institutions to collect their own qualitative data that could lead to formation of policies and practices positively affecting mid-life doctoral student retention. Students' own opinions and anecdotes offer opportunities to identify institutional barriers to their success (Nerad & Miller, 1996; Bair & Haworth, 1999). Understanding how life experiences affect older students' educational experiences permits administrators and faculty members to adapt programs and pedagogy to better satisfy the particular needs of the mid-life student.

Faculty and administrators can use the themes and observations included in this paper to examine their own educational doctoral programs. In finding some similarities, they may explore changing some of their policies, requirements, and expectations to positively affect the doctoral studies experiences of mid-life doctoral students. For example, one study's recommendations included a first year evaluation conference between a doctoral student and faculty member in order to discuss progress and expectations (Nerad & Miller, 1996).

Other Research Implications

Doctoral students and potential doctoral students may find the experiences of the subjects in this study validating and/or valuable to their own. In addition, they may find potential dissertation or research projects involving their programs, institutions, faculty and peers as they confirm and/or disconfirm the findings implied in this study.

A quantitative study involving a large number of mid-life doctoral students would contribute greatly to further understanding and generalizeability of findings. The groundwork

laid in this and other qualitative studies could be used in the design of institutional models of persistence and retention and/or doctoral student support services.

Data within this study have implications for further investigations focusing on gender differences in education doctoral students' experiences. Faculty relationships, family adjustments, classroom roles, and effects of stress on male and female students are examples of deserving and potentially revealing topics.

I plan a further qualitative investigation of the later stages of the educational doctoral program process, and hope to recruit additional subjects for phases II and III. In addition, a longitudinal study of a cohort or several cohorts would contribute to the literature on this "sandwich" demographic.

It may be time for trifocals.

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